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CEMETERIES Can Be for the Living, Too

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What are cemeteries for? You are in for a surprise if you have limited your answer to "interment of the dead." Even now, cemeteries are being used for driving, bicycling, walking, and jogging... for fishing or squirrel and bird feeding... for resting or picnicking... for ball playing, kite and model plane flying... for stone rubbing, photographing, and berry picking... indeed, for any variety of recreational pursuits. And, with sound planning and controls, this maximized use of cemetery lands can be achieved without losing sight of the cemeteries' original intent, namely respectful interment of the dead.

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CEMETERIES CAN BE FOR THE LIVING, TOO

Many cemeteries in the Eastern Megalopolis -- that highly populated land corridor stretching from Boston to Washington, D. C. -- are already lending themselves to numerous uses, in addition to interment. Because they remain among the last oases of green space in the midst of complexes of steel and concrete, these cemeteries have quite unintentionally become recreation sites for people and havens for wildlife. Recognizing such uses makes it prudent and rational for us to undertake planning and management to insure that decorum and traditional values are preserved, while the various cemetery-land needs of the living evolve and are met.

During a recent summer, USDA Forest Service environmental researchers conducted a study to determine exactly how urban cemeteries are being used for wildlife habitat, nature study, and recreational purposes. The researchers, Ronald A. Dixon and Jack Ward Thomas, both wildlife biologists stationed at Amherst, Mass., also set out to determine how the full service potential of urban interment grounds might best be realized.

Their study was undertaken in Greater Boston, which includes -- in addition to Boston Proper -- the suburbs of Arlington, Belmont, Brookline, Cambridge, Dedham, Newton, Somerville, Waltham, and Watertown. In this area, 35% of the remaining undeveloped or "open" space is occupied by 50 cemeteries, covering 1,716 acres of precious ground. Ninety-six percent of these cemeteries are open to the public. And overall management of these cemeteries is in the hands of 23 individuals.

All managers except one were willing to permit the scientists to study their areas. The one denial resulted from the location of one cemetery, adjacent to a prison whose inmates maintained and used it for outdoor recreation. Authorities felt that a study there would be upsetting to the normal prison routine.

The Forest Service study was designed specifically to determine: 1) the bird populations of each cemetery and how local bird watchers use cemeteries; 2) managers' attitudes toward other uses of their grounds; 3) actual uses of cemeteries for recreation; 4) local teachers' attitudes and use patterns of cemeteries for field trips; and 5) management schemes for future cemetery use.

Bird Populations in Cemeteries

In sampling bird populations, the scientists encountered a total of 95 different bird species in the 50 cemeteries. The number of species and of individual birds varied in each cemetery, according to the size of the area, and the variety and amount of vegetation there. Researchers were elated to find 1,195 nests of 34 different bird species in their study areas.

Researchers also found that only 4 of the 23 cemetery managers had made any effort to encourage wildlife on their areas. Those few who did, had simply provided a bird feeder the year-round, left natural areas or uncut hay, or taken wildlife into consideration when planting vegetation.

Observations also showed about 20 different kinds of mammals in the cemeteries, along with numerous amphibeans, reptiles, fish, and insects.

The researchers also designed a questionnaire survey to determine what use local birdwatchers had made of cemeteries in the Boston

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Area in the course of their recreational pursuits.

AS A RESULT OF THIS PHASE OF THEIR STUDY, THE RESEARCHERS CONCLUDED THAT CEMETERIES COULD BE EXTREMELY VALUABLE AREAS FOR WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS FOR URBAN YOUNGSTERS AND ADULTS. CEMETERIES, WHICH CAN SUPPORT A WIDE VARIETY OF PLANTS, AND WHICH GENERALLY OFFER ALL THE LIFE REQUIREMENTS OF WATER, FOOD, SHELTER, AND BREEDING SITES, WOULD BE VERY WELL SUITED FOR WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT -- ESPECIALLY FOR BIRDS.

How Managers View Use of Their Grounds

When interviewed by the researchers, nearly all of the managers said they were aware their lands were being used for other than gravesite visits. They estimated that about 62,058 visitors used their grounds each year for recreational activities.

Only 18% of the managers found ball playing a fitting cemetery activity; only 29% considered dog walking acceptable. But all found historical tours proper, and 98% were in favor of permitting school classes to visit.

Cemeteries for Recreation

The Forest Service researchers observed a total of 2,160 people using the 50 cemeteries for 29 different purposes at various times of the summer day. Two-thirds of these were observed using Boston cemeteries for other than family gravesite visits. Historical touring occurred most often. Driving and walking were also frequently observed.

Extrapolating from their samples,

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Cemeteries are already being used for a variety of recreational pursuits, including historical touring, ball playing, stone rubbing, rambling, and dog walking.

researchers estimate that -- without specific invitation or encouragement -- there were about 86,000 visits to 50 Boston cemeteries during the summer season for recreational purposes.

AS A RESULT OF TALKING TO MANAGERS, THE FOREST SERVICE RESEARCHERS CONCLUDED THAT SOME RECREATIONAL USES COULD BE MADE MORE COMPATIBLE WITH TRADITIONAL USES WITH A LITTLE EFFORT. CEMETERIES COULD EASILY HOST RECREATIONISTS. AFTER OBSERVING ACTIVITIES, THEY DECIDED THAT MANY RECREATION ACTIVITIES COULD BE MADE SUITABLE FOR CEMETERIES. FOR INSTANCE RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT MANY OF THE ATTITUDES THAT MANAGERS HAD EXPRESSED AGAINST BICYCLING IN CEMETERIES WERE DUE TO THE HAZARD OF ACCIDENTS WITH AUTOMOBILES, RATHER THAN TO SOCIAL INCOMPATIBILITY. IN ORDER TO MAKE CEMETERIES SAFER FOR BIKE TRAVEL, SIGNS COULD BE PLACED AT ENTRANCES TO WARN CYCLISTS OF POTENTIAL DANGERS, AND SPEED BUMPS AND STOP SIGNS COULD BE PLACED AT INTERSECTIONS. COSTS COULD BE RECOVERED BY USER FEES, BORNE BY THE FACILITY AS A PUBLIC RELATIONS EXPENSE, OR CARRIED AS A LEGITIMATE EXPENSE IN PUBLIC CEMETERIES. LAWS MIGHT FURTHER HELP BY EXEMPTING CEMETERIES FROM ANY LIABILITY THAT COULD RESULT FROM RECREATIONAL ACCIDENTS.

OTHER RECREATIONAL PROBLEMS MIGHT BE ALLEVIATED BY THE ISSUANCE OF PERMITS -- POSSIBLY AS LARGE, COLORED, NUMBERED BADGES. IN SOME CITIES, STONE RUBBERS ARE ALREADY REQUIRED TO OBTAIN PERMITS. CEMETERY OFFICIALS COULD ISSUE SIMILAR PERMITS, INDICATE CONDUCT, AND DESIGNATE AREAS FOR PARTICULAR RECREATION PURSUITS. DOG WALKERS, FOR INSTANCE, COULD BE ORDERED TO LEASH THEIR DOGS AND COULD BE CONFINED TO THE WOODED, UNDEVELOPED AREAS NOT FREQUENTED BY WORKMEN OR PLOT HOLDERS.

School Use of Cemeteries

The Forest Service researchers sent a questionnaire to some 1,782 public and private school teachers at institutions within 1 mile of each cemetery to determine their attitudes and uses of the cemeteries for class instruction. Returns came from 22.3%. Of these, 59.8% had conducted 1,497 outdoor class field trips during the preceeding school year. Cemeteries accounted for 4.1% of these visits and ranked fifth behind parks, private lands, zoos, and school neighborhoods as the top sites for outdoor trips. Cemeteries ranked ahead of museums, the aquarium, beaches, and farms.

In addition, 17% of the teachers reported having considered taking a class trip to a cemetery and 9% reported actually having done so. This 9% includes teachers who had taken a total of 42 classes to 16 different cemeteries.

THE RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT MORE THAN HALF OF THE TEACHERS HELD FAVORABLE VIEWS OF CEMETERIES AS POTENTIAL FIELD TRIP AREAS. ACCORDING TO THE RESEARCHERS, THIS COULD MEAN THAT HALF OF ALL BOSTON TEACHERS WOULD SERIOUSLY CONSIDER USING NEARBY CEMETERIES FOR FUTURE FIELD TRIPS. THIS, COUPLED WITH THE FACT THAT 98% OF THE

Some cemetery managers discourage or prohibit recreational visits... Littering and vandalism are cited by managers as major reasons for not opening their gates to recreational users. Forest Service scientists feel that innovations in management could help alleviate such management problems and could eventually succeed in winning harmony for both cemetery managers and the recreation-seeking public.

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In some urban areas, cemeteries provide suitable habitats that would otherwise be scarce for cottontails, squirrels, and waterfowl.

MANAGERS WOULD ALLOW SUCH CLASS VISITS, COULD INDICATE THE VERY REAL POTENTIAL OF CEMETERIES FOR THIS PURPOSE.

Future Use of Cemeteries

According to Forest Service researchers Dixon and Thomas, developing a plan for future use of cemeteries is necessary to assure that incompatible activities are excluded, while compatible ones are accommodated, thus avoiding conflict. Choices need to be made, based on age of the cemetery, ownership or control, layout of the grounds, and amount and type of vegetation present.

This study has shown that it is not a question of whether or not to use cemeteries for recreational activity. They are already in such use, and as green, open, and relatively inviolate spaces in the midst of the burgeoning city, pressures for other areas will multiply.

The environmental researchers plan to go on to develop management programs for nature study areas in cemeteries and to develop lesson plans and educational materials for teachers and students to use on their cemetery outings in the future.

The researchers caution that many of the findings from their Boston cemetery study, while relevant to other metropolitan areas, may not be applicable everywhere. While nationally it has been reported that about 2 million acres of land are designed as interment facilities, many of these lands will not be usable for other purposes, because of local traditions and laws, or because of the availability of other more suitable green spaces.

This research does not take an advocate positon. It merely points to "what is", and then asks "what if?" and "why not?".

Photos by Ronald A. Dixon